

Genealogical Conundrums

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In his 2002 article 'The Lancastrian Claim to the Throne' John Ashdown-Hill documented a very useful discovery, that Henry of Bolingbroke seized the throne from his cousin, Richard II, based on his descent, not from his paternal grandfather, Edward III, but from his great-great-great-grandfather Henry III, through his mother Blanche of Lancaster.¹ This claim was based on the premise that Henry III eldest son, was not Edward I but Edmund, Earl of Lancaster, known as Crouchback, and owing to the latter's deformity, he was deemed unfit to be heir to the throne. John pointed out that the interest to Ricardians, was that such a descent diminished Henry Tudor's own claim to the throne which he claimed both by conquest and by decent from Henry IV's father, John of Gaunt, third surviving son of Edward III. Although modestly consigned to a footnote, John was also able to demonstrate why Henry as king confirmed the legitimization of his Beaufort family of the half blood but specifically barred them from succeeding to the throne – they were simply descended from the wrong mother.² This discovery in turn strengthened any possible claim to the English throne from the descendants of Henry IV's sister, Philippa, Queen of Portugal.

However, John goes on to state that 'had there been no descendants of Henry IV's sister, Philippa of Lancaster, Queen of Portugal, the Lancastrian claim of Henry IV would have died out with Henry VI'.³ No so. Henry IV had two daughters, Blanche and Philippa. They married respectively Louis of the Palatine, Duke of Bavaria and Erik VII, King of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The present author has not investigated the possible families of these sisters, although she believes there was no surviving issue of Erik and Philippa, but as there are already a plethora of foreign candidates, perhaps this line of enquiry need not be pursued. What is more relevant, is that John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster had a second daughter, and possibly a third, Sabel, who would have died young. The surviving second daughter was Elizabeth and as she married within the English aristocracy, her descendants may have had a great appeal as possible contenders for the throne, had the situation ever arisen. With the current speculation over the legitimacy of Edward IV, is it of passing interest to examine Elizabeth's descendants and to ponder whether they were aware of their exalted position? It should, however, be stressed that this is all idle speculation in view of Henry VII and his descendant being the *de facto* rulers.

Elizabeth was born in 1362 or 1364 and on 24 June 1380, at Kenilworth. She married John de Hastings, Earl of Pembroke who was several years her junior.⁴ Dissatisfied with her child-husband, Elizabeth fell in love with Sir John Holland, the half-brother of Richard II. Described as having 'great charm and considerably ability' he was nevertheless 'violent, ruthless and self-seeking' and set out to seduce the young Elizabeth and succeeded in getting her pregnant.⁵ Fortunately for Holland, he was favoured by John of Gaunt, who appointed him constable of his army which was about to embark for Spain. The couple were married on 24 June 1386 and the following day they sailed with Gaunt on his expedition to attempt to gain the throne of Castile. Holland was created duke of Exeter in 1397, and as one of the Lords Appellant, he was executed, probably on the orders of the late duke of Gloucester's mother-in-law, in January 1400. Elizabeth barely waited a year before she married her third husband, Sir John Cornwall, who had caught her eye at a tournament in York and who after her death was created Lord Fanhope. Elizabeth died on 24 November 1425 and is buried at Burford in Shropshire.⁶

Elizabeth bore seven children to her second and third husbands. By Cornwall, she had a son, Sir John, who was slain at the siege of Meaux, aged seventeen, in 1421, and a daughter, Constance, who married John d'Arundel, Earl of Arundel and who, like her brother, *decessit sine prole* (died without issue).

¹ 'The Lancastrian claim to the throne', *The Ricardian*, vol. 13 (2003), pp. 27-38. Anthony Goodman *John of Gaunt*, Harlow 1992, p. 364.

² *Ibid*, p. 34 footnote.

³ *Ibid*, p. 36.

⁴ *The Complete Peerage*, vol. 4 (vol. 10 reprint in 4 vols), p. 395.

⁵ Goodman, p. 98.

⁶ *CP*, vol. 2 (vol. 5), pp. 253-4.

Of her five children by Holland, the eldest son Richard died young, nothing is known about Sir Edmund and her younger daughter, unnamed, married Richard de Vere, the eleventh Earl of Oxford, but had no issue. From her remaining two children, John, Duke of Exeter, and Constance Holland she had only four grandchildren. One was Henry, Duke of Exeter, who married Anne, daughter of Richard, Duke of York, and their only child, who married Thomas Grey, Marquess of Dorset, died childless. Another grandson, Thomas, Baron Rougemont (accordingly to the *Complete Peerage* Richemount-Grey), who was attainted in 1461, also died childless. Only through her grandchildren, Anne Holland and Edmund Grey, Earl of Kent, did Elizabeth's line survive, see figure 1. However, compared to her brother Henry, whose four sons only produced one surviving heir, Henry VI, she was spectacularly successful. She became the ancestress of the earls of Westmorland and the earls and eventually duke of Kent, with collateral lines running in all directions including the dukes of Chandos and the Lords Grey of Wilton.

None of Elizabeth's descendants, however, seem to have been particularly conscious of their prestigious lineage, serving Lancastrian, Yorkist and Tudor masters as needs must or according to their individual loyalties. So perhaps such speculation about alternative candidates to the throne is just the preserve of genealogists, who, like those people who indulge in fantasy casting of plays, films and football teams, simply enjoy a pleasurable exercise in futility. So whilst in this vein, let us take things a stage further back in time and look at the aunts of Blanche of Lancaster, and the aristocratic dynasties they bred.⁷

Blanche of Lancaster's father, Henry, Duke of Lancaster, known as Henry of Grosmont, had six sisters who if he had not been born or survived, would have been the co-heirs of their father, Henry, Earl of Lancaster instead of Grosmont's daughters, Blanche and Maud. Three of these sisters are of particular interest. The third daughter, Maud, married William de Burgh, Earl of Ulster and their daughter, Elizabeth married Lionel, Duke of Clarence, the second surviving son of Edward III. As the Yorkist claim to the throne was derived from the descent of Clarence through the Mortimers, this neatly brings his descendants, Edward IV and Richard III, back into the royal Lancastrian line. The second daughter, Mary, married Henry, Lord Percy. Their son became the first Percy earl of Northumberland and through their grandson, Hotspur, became the ancestors of Jane Seymour, the third wife of Henry VIII and mother of Edward VI, see figure 2. The youngest daughter Joan, married John, Lord Mowbray and their grandson, John, became the first Mowbray duke of Norfolk and ancestor of two further queens of Henry VIII – Anne Boleyn and Katherine Howard. Returning to the genesis of this article, John Ashdown-Hill made the delightful point that Catherine of Aragon 'had a claim to the English throne which was rather superior to that of her husband, King Henry VIII'.⁸ So it would appear had three other wives. No doubt if this had ever been suggested to the king he would have become apoplectic!

Finally, the question to be asked is how true was the legend that Crouchback was the eldest son of Henry III? Further research into this being a contemporary story in the thirteenth century, as opposed to contemporary with Henry of Bolingbroke's claim, would be very welcome although the chances of us ever knowing if the story was true is rather remote. It would also be interesting to know if Bolingbroke truly did believe this family tradition which gave legality to his seizure of the throne. His 'disinheriting' of his Beaufort half-family from ever having a claim to the throne rather indicates that he did and perhaps a comparison can be drawn to another so-called usurper, King Richard III, in believing that his nephews were illegitimate and that he had no choice but to assume the crown of England.

⁷ *CP*, vol. 3 (vol. 7), p. 401

⁸ 'Lancastrian claim', p. 37.

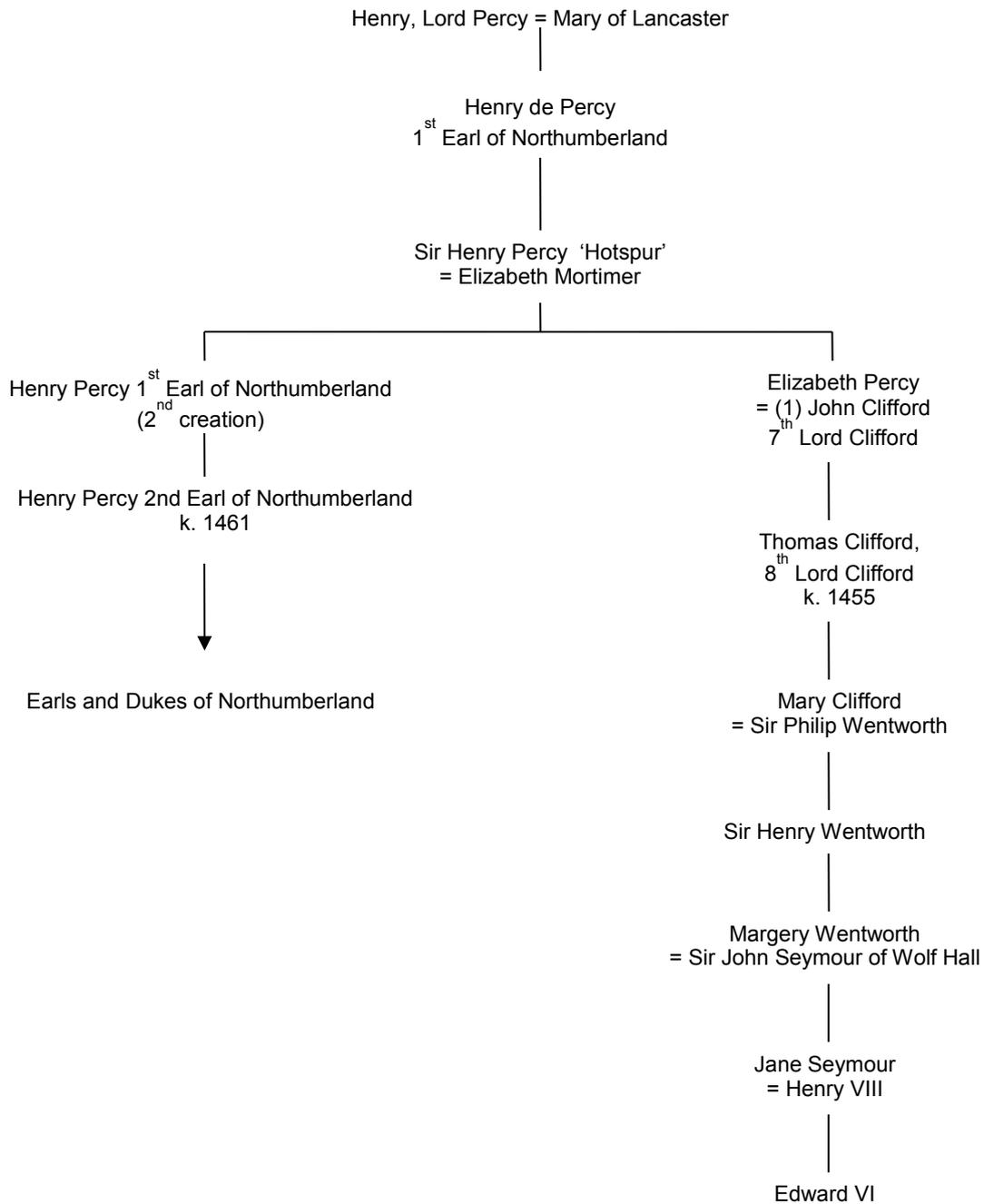


Fig. 2 Abbreviated Pedigree showing the Descent of Jane Seymour from Mary, daughter of Henry, Earl of Lancaster

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